

Scots conservation group faces fine over deer management

A LEADING conservation charity is facing fines after failing to meet targets agreed as part of a forest regeneration programme.

The National Trust for Scotland, which owns the vast Mar Lodge estate in the Cairngorms National Park, signed up to a 25-year agreement with Scottish Natural

Heritage (SNH), the government body which looks after the country's landscapes.

A series of five-year management plans are contained in the 25-year agreement and are used to assess the trust's progress with its conservation, regeneration and ecological aims.

One of its aims is the

regeneration of the Caledonian pine forests on the estate which are under threat from overgrazing by deer.

The trust has admitted that while deer numbers have been reduced to around 1,700 from a high of 3,350 in 1995, failure to introduce its deer management policy early enough meant

forest regeneration was delayed.

Terry Levinthal, director of conservation services and projects at the trust, said: "Although the trust will be penalised by SNH, critics who suggest this proves that our approach at Mar Lodge Estate is not working have completely mis-

understood the situation.

"In fact, we missed our targets because we did not implement our deer management policy early enough and progress with forest regeneration was delayed as a result.

"As recognised by SNH, we have in the last three years made excellent headway with the

regeneration of the Caledonian forest within Mar Lodge Estate and there are vibrant and tangible results for anyone to see.

"We have just completed an ecological survey of the estate and this shows the density of woodland almost doubling and we can show that this happened in direct correlation to the

deer population being brought down to a sustainable level of around 1,700.

"It is disappointing that progress was not consistent through the period of the concordat with SNH but we realised that we could not meet some of the targets agreed back in 2008 and therefore told SNH that

we would not take up a portion of the grant they had allocated to us; they were very appreciative of our up front stance."

A trust spokesman said size of the fine was not yet known

Since 1996 the trust has received £126,000 each year from SNH towards the management of Mar Lodge Estate.